ENGLISH IN THE GLOBAL WORKPLACE: A NARRATIVE APPROACH

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Abstract

This paper aims to contribute to the discussion on the new directions in ESP education and revisit the concepts of the native speaker and lingua franca as seen from the lay perspective. It reports the results of a research study – an analysis of narratives of ten Polish professionals working for international organizations who share their experiences and tell stories on communicating and using English in the workplace. The narrative approach adopted in the study gives an insight into individual perspectives, facilitating an in-depth, holistic understanding of the studied matters. The findings have shown that native English is still deemed to be the main point of reference by the participants of the study and the notion of lingua franca appears unfamiliar and difficult to accept, especially in the educational context. Variations in individual preferences concerning communication with native or non-native users of English and declared comfort related to such interactions have been observed and correlated with the level of proficiency in English. In most cases, more proficient users have reported to feel more comfortable in interactions with native speakers of English. They have also demonstrated certain language awareness, which stands in a sharp contrast to the participants less proficient in English, whose perception of language is very simplified. As regards pedagogical implications, the study has signalled a need for sound cultural preparation of professionals working in international environment and a greater emphasis on developing communication skills for socialising – an essential aspect of business communication.

Key words

ELF, lingua franca, professional communication, workplace narratives

1 Introduction

One of the challenges for contemporary higher education is its relevance to the needs of the global workplace and ensuring students’ employability. Language and communication skills of graduates are considered crucial for their future careers and professional success. As Victor (1992: 246) notes: “It is probably better to have mediocre technical skills and excellent international business communication skills than to have excellent technical skills and poor international business communication skills”. English remains the dominating language of workplace interactions and its knowledge is taken for granted in international corporations that run their business activity in the international,